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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews some of the research literature relating to self concept and deafness. In summarizing the relevant research, attention was given to the types of questions to which researchers have sought answers, the theoretical orientations which have guided investigations, and the kinds of methodological problems which have characterized research in this field. It was noted that the severest limitation in research with the deaf rested with the inappropriateness of testing devices, a situation not uncommon to research on personality attributes of other groups of persons. Moreover, the need to investigate self concept from a developmental perspective was viewed as central to the task of better understanding the life adjustment of the deaf individual. (Author)

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Self-Concept and Deafness: A Review of Research Literature

Paper Series No. 27

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Self-Concept and Deafness:
A Review of Research Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to review some of the research literature relating to self-concept and deafness. In attempting to summarize the relevant research in this area, attention was given to: (1) the types of questions to which researchers have sought answers; (2) the theoretical orientations which have guided investigations; and (3) the kinds of methodological problems which have characterized research in this field. It was noted that the severest limitation in research with the deaf rested with the inappropriateness of testing devices, a situation not uncommon to research on personality attributes of other groups of persons. Moreover, the need to investigate self-concept from a developmental perspective was viewed as central to the task of better understanding the life adjustment of the deaf individual.

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A science of psychological inquiry that seeks to understand human behavior is confronted ultimately with the concept of a self-structure. From the earliest days of infancy, it has been suggested that the child may begin to organize perceptually those aspects of the environment to which he attends. As the child becomes more and more engaged in the world around him, he takes on the task of interpreting his experiences and, concomitantly, his relationship to the world. Thus, the self-structure or self-concept begins and continues to develop from the earliest kinds of experiences that an individual has with his surroundings, particularly those involving interpersonal relationships.

The ideas surrounding the development of and changes in self-concept have particular significance in the study of handicapped populations, including both social and physical handicapping conditions. If a handicapped individual perceives him or herself in a negative manner, then it is likely that he or she will assume the role which such self-perceptions dictate in a variety of psychological situations. While the effects of physical handicaps, in general, on the development of the self-concept have been found in many instances to be negative (McCandless, 1967; Meissner & Thoreson, 1967; Richardson & Emerson, 1970), research on self-attitudes among hearing-impaired persons has been subject to many methodological problems.

The purpose of this paper was to review some of the psychological literature relating to self-concept and deafness. In attempting to organize the findings of various research efforts in this area, attention was given to: (1) the major types of questions to which researchers have sought answers; (2) the theoretical orientations which have guided investigations; and (3) the kinds of methodological problems which have characterized research in this field.

Symbolic Interactionism

The idea that the self-concept is formed wholly through an individual's experience and interaction with others is tracable primarily to the writings of Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902). This position later was elaborated into what has now come to be called the symbolic interactionist approach to self-definition, or simply the interactionist approach (see, for example, Gordon & Gergen, 1968; Manis & Meltzer, 1972).

According to this theory, the development of knowledge concerning the self is dependent entirely upon one's experiences with others, which provide information in the form of feedback and expectations regarding the self. Language is considered to be an essential element in the symbolic interaction process and in the organization of experience, both of which are necessary for the development of the self-concept (Mead, 1934). As such, Myklebust (1960) argued that deafness imposes on experience by limiting interaction and linguistic feedback from the social environment, thus affecting the development of the self-concept. This hypothesis was investigated by administering the Drawing of a Human Figure Test to 511 deaf children and adolescents in residential schools,

319 deaf day school students, and a control group of public day school hearing students. Analyses of the test results indicated that the hearing-impaired children differed from the normal hearing group in terms of body image and self-perception, in the direction of greater perceptual distortion. In addition, the students in residential schools for the deaf showed less stress, but more inaccurate person-perception than did deaf day school students.

Another investigation utilizing symbolic interactionist concepts was conducted by Craig (1965), who studied the self-concepts of deaf children sociometrically. Comparisons of self-ratings with ratings given by peers indicated that, among the nine- to 12-year-old children studied, deaf students were significantly less accurate ($p<.05$) than hearing children in their perceptions of themselves. In particular, both residential and day school deaf students tended to predict higher sociometric ratings for themselves than were actually given by their peers, with the deaf institutionalized group rating themselves significantly higher than did either the deaf day school students or normal hearing public school children. The findings of differences in self-image between deaf residential and deaf day school students by both Myklebust (1960) and Craig (1965) demonstrated the importance of controlling for differences in living situation when comparing self-concept development between different referent groups.

Craig's (1965) finding of a tendency toward inflated self-regard in deaf children was consistent with data from an earlier study by Brunschwig (1936). As part of this investigation, 159 deaf residential school children of about age twelve were found to score lower on "personal inferiority" on the Rogers Test of Personality Adjustment (a self-report inventory) than did hearing public school children (Brunschwig, 1936).

That is, the deaf children reported a more positive self-image than did the hearing children, although the differences were not statistically significant. However, a comparison group of deaf day school children was not utilized, so the effects of deafness on self-concept could not be distinguished from the effects of a sheltered, residential school environment.

The studies cited above suggest that the self-concepts of deaf children may differ from those of their hearing agemates. Moreover, self-concept levels within the deaf population have been found to vary directly with the existence or extent of institutional living. However, the dimensions of the observed differences have not been fully explored. While there is some evidence to indicate that the deaf child's conception of him or herself may be subject to inaccuracy owing to a language deficit, it is also unclear whether this problem extends across the life span into age ranges not encompassed by previous study samples. Experimental treatments of this issue will require a longitudinal methodology

Psycho-Social Development and Self-Concept

In contrast to the views of Myklebust (1960) and Craig (1965) that paucity of social, especially linguistic, interaction may hinder the development of self-concept in deaf children, Meadow (1968, 1969) attributed problems in personality development of deaf individuals to experiences of negative feedback from important others. The effects on self-concept of negative experiences specific to deafness were studied by comparing 58 deaf children of deaf parents with a matched group of deaf children of hearing parents, who in Meadow's view were more likely to react negatively to their child's disability. The children were students from all grades in a state residential school for the deaf.

Meadow's hypothesis was supported by findings which showed that children from homes with deaf parents and positive family climate obtained the highest scores on a Self-Image Test devised for use with deaf children, and on teacher-counselor ratings of self-esteem and self-confidence. In comparison, deaf children of hearing parents and "lower" family climate were found to score lowest on these measures (Meadow, 1968, 1969). These results provided evidence that the quality of interaction between the deaf child and his or her parents is related to the evaluational component of the self-concept, usually called self-esteem or self-regard. Meadow (1968, 1969) suggested further that the hearing parents' higher expectations for the deaf child's achievement may be the primary factor affecting the quality of interaction between deaf children and hearing parents, as compared to deaf children and deaf parents.

Meadow's (1968, 1969) conclusions regarding the importance of positive interaction between parents and child were in agreement with those of Neuhaus (1969). In Neuhaus's investigation, ratings of emotional adjustment of deaf children and adolescents were found to be significantly related to positive parental attitudes toward children, as measured by a questionnaire. Similarly, Brill (1960) used ratings of adjustment to compare equal-sized groups (n = 45 in each) of deaf children from families with deaf parents, hearing parents, and hearing parents with at least one other deaf child. While these three groups differed in the variance of adjustment scores, significant differences in adjustment ratings between groups were observed only among the boys, who comprised two-thirds of the sample. Findings showed that deaf children with deaf parents or deaf siblings received more ratings at both the positive and negative ends of the adjustment scale, in comparison with deaf children of hearing parents.

Neither Neuhaus (1969) nor Brill (1960) investigated self-concept specifically, but their findings indicated that personality development in deaf children may be affected by the nature of the relationship between parents and children. The possible effects of deafness on the development of self-identity and emotional maturity, related to the deaf child's limited interaction and/or negative feedback from family and others, were discussed later in terms of Erikson's (1959) theory by both Schlesinger and Meadow (1972) and Kennedy (1973). Some factors suggested as affecting deaf children's positive resolution of the crises marking Erikson's stages of development were negative parental reactions to the child's deafness, excessive parental restraint of the deaf child's activities, difficulty in communication, and estrangement from normal hearing peers and teachers (Kennedy, 1973; Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972).

Beyond the particular circumstances of the parent-child interaction, Goffman (1963) argued that if an individual possesses a handicap that carries with it negative social connotations, then he is likely to learn from his social interactions that he should regard himself with the same negative connotations which society attributes to his handicap. Extending this argument to research on deafness, Sussman (1973) investigated the self-concepts of a sample of deaf adults residing in the metropolitan New York City area. Sussman reported that negative perceptions of self frequently were associated with beliefs that hearing persons perceive the deaf in terms of defects, real or imaginary. Hence, while the quality of one's interactions with others may be viewed as critical to his or her mental concept of self, the individual's interpretation of

social experience represents the actual foundation upon which that same concept is built.

Cognitive-Developmental Factors in Self-Definition

Rather than studying the direct impact of experiential factors associated with deafness upon the development of self-concept, as in the work cited above, another approach has been to focus on the cognitive development of deaf children in relation to personality factors. Of particular interest has been the role of language development in relation to social and personality maturation. Differences in the semantic aspects of the deaf child's language development, as compared to that of hearing children, was discussed by Levine (1960). According to Levine, the deaf child may tend to attribute very literal meanings to words, having difficulty in understanding their more abstract connotations. This view received empirical support from Green and Shepherd (1975), who investigated semantic structure in 33 residential deaf students aged nine to 17, using a semantic differential technique. Their results showed that the deaf students had a more restrictive semantic system than has been found in normal hearing young people.

The semantic differential was used by Blanton and Nunnally (1964) to investigate attitudes toward self among 173 deaf children and adolescents and 178 adolescents with normal hearing. While the deaf young people were found to use fewer evaluational concepts in a word association measure than did hearing individuals, the deaf respondents evaluated themselves more negatively. Specifically, the deaf children tended to describe themselves and their parents as less good and less well-adjusted than did the hearing respondents.

In relation to self-concept, both Levine (1960) and Myklebust (1960) have suggested that the linguistic limitations of the deaf child may be detrimental to both social interaction and the development of self-identity. In an earlier study, Levine (1956) interpreted the results of a Rorschach assessment of 31 teenaged females at a residential school for the deaf as showing personality constriction when compared to a standardization population of hearing students. Levine maintained that these results were "a manifestation of the overall language constriction associated with early, profound deafness". In addition, Lewis (1968) investigated the relationship of linguistic measures to orectic development, defined as the development of attitudes toward the self and others. It was found that among hearing-impaired students aged eight to 16 from several schools, teacher ratings of personal maturation were positively related to the students' orectic, or social-emotional, vocabulary (Lewis, 1968). These findings indicated that linguistic deficiency may hinder the deaf child's development of understanding of him or herself as well as his or her relationships with others.

To summarize, the observed differences between deaf and hearing children in the area of semantic development (Blanton & Nunnally, 1964; Green & Shepherd, 1975) have been postulated as having a restricting effect on personality development, especially in terms of self-identity and social maturity (Levine, 1960). Evidence supporting this hypothesis was provided earlier by Levine (1956), and also by Lewis (1968). For a review of other literature comparing the cognitive and personality development of deaf children with that of hearing populations, the reader is referred to Koetitz (1976).

Other Research Issues

On the basis of evidence obtained in the studies reviewed above, it has been suggested that the development of self-concept among hearing-impaired persons differs in some ways from that of normal hearing persons. Research findings in the direction of, perhaps, inflated self-esteem (e.g, Brunschwig, 1936; Craig, 1965) have been contradicted by findings of both negative self-regard and personality constriction (Levine, 1956; Sussman, 1973). Moreover, differences in self-concept levels have been found to exist within the deaf population, with residential school students showing more inaccurate self-perception than deaf day school pupils (Craig, 1965; Myklebust, 1960), and deaf children of deaf parents showing more positive self-image than deaf children of hearing parents (Meadow, 1968, 1969). However, these findings typically have not addressed the issue of development per se. Rather, they have relied upon comparisons of different referent groups using a static measurement process, perhaps obviating the effects of a developmental lag on the part of deaf individuals.

Other studies focusing on self-concept as a specific and relational construct have appeared in the psychological literature; however, they have been few in number relative to those concerned with self-concept as a global personality trait. Joiner and associates (Joiner, Erikson, Crittenden & Stevenson, 1969) studied the self-perceptions of deaf children's ability as it relates to academic achievement. As such, these investigators found that a measure of Self-Concept of Academic Ability was a better predictor of grade-point average than were IQ measures for both deaf and hearing adolescents. Joiner et al. (1969) concluded that increased attention to students' self-perceptions of ability may facilitate academic achievement.

Schwartz, Ross and Houchins (1975) also narrowed the focus of their study to the self-concept of expressive language in an attempt to determine which communication skills were perceived by deaf adolescents as most problematic. Their findings indicated that the deaf subjects tested varied considerably among themselves in the extent of their discrepancies between real- and ideal-self on this particular dimension of the global self-concept. Given the recent experimental work which has been conducted with hearing individuals relating self to the specific structure of the social situation (see, for example, Webster & Sobieszek, 1974), it may be fruitful to begin moving more from the position that the self-concept acts to influence behavior consistently across situations, to a position of situational specificity.

Finally, research on the validity of self-concept instruments, especially paper-and-pencil inventories, has indicated that caution must be observed in their interpretation with deaf respondents. In particular, Rudner (1978) identified several linguistic structures which biased items against hearing-impaired respondents on an achievement inventory. Contrary to this position, Vegeley and Elliott (1968) maintained that the lower adjustment scores of a group of deaf children on the California Test of Personality could not be explained as an artifact of the test. However, the study sample of 53 deaf students included 20 children with diagnosed learning disabilities, which may have biased the results in a negative direction. In addition, Vegeley and Elliott (1968) measured comprehension by instructing the children to circle items which they did not understand. However, recent research by Garrison, DeCaro, Tesch and Emerton (1978) suggests that the above method may be an inadequate means of assessing comprehension among the deaf. Garrison and associates

interviewed deaf adolescents regarding their understanding of items on the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, finding that the respondents made idiosyncratic interpretations of many items without being aware that their understanding was incomplete. Thus, while studies of self-concept development in deaf children may provide valuable information for instructors, parents and counselors, investigators must distinguish between responses due to the linguistic handicap of deaf persons, and the actual self-perceptions of hearing-impaired individuals.

Summary and Critique

The purpose of this paper was to review some of the psychological literature relating to self-concept and deafness. While the present paper does not pretend to be exhaustive in either the number or extent of research studies reviewed, it does provide the reader with some flavour of the kinds of research which have been conducted regarding the effects of deafness on the development of the self-concept.

In order to provide a general overview of the literature covered in this review, Table 1 summarizes the particular investigations according to their order of discussion in the previous sections. This order is convenient also insofar as it provides a comparison of research findings derived within particular theoretical perspectives.

In attempting to synthesize the information presented in Table 1, it is apparent first that the foci of the studies reviewed varies considerably along a dimension which appears to range from the rather broad notion of "adjustment" (e.g, Brunschwig, 1936) to a more specific construct of self under particular environmental conditions (e.g., Joiner et al., 1969). Moreover, the range of instrumentation utilized

Table 1. Overview of Research Studies Reviewed

Author(s)	Focus	Instrumentation	Deaf Population
Myklebust (1960)	Cognitive, Social, and Personality development	Drawing of a Human Figure Test	Residential and day school students (n = 830)
Craig (1965)	Concept of self and others	Sociometric task	Children (n = 48)
Brunschwig (1936)	Personality	Rogers Test of Personality Adjustment	Residential school students (n = 159)
Meadow (1968, 1969)	Socialization, Family communication	Self-Image Test, Observation	Children with parents (n = 120)
Keuhaus (1969)	Behavioral adjustment, Parental attitudes	Parental Attitudes Questionnaires, Observation	Children and adolescents with parents (n = 84)
Brill (1960)	Psycho/social adjustment	Observation	Children (n = 135)
Green & Shepherd (1975)	Meaning systems	Semantic Differential	Children (n = 33)
Blanton & Nunnally (1964)	Associational and connotative aspects of language	Semantic Differential	Children and adolescents (n = 173)
Levine (1956)	Language constriction and personality	Rorschach	Adolescent females (n = 31)
Lewis (1968)	Cognitive behavior, Orectic behavior	Observation, Linguistic Measures	Children and adolescents (n = 721)
Joiner et al. (1969)	Self-concept (task specific) and achievement	Self Concept of Academic Ability scale	Adolescents (n = 80)
Schwartz et al. (1975)	Real-ideal self congruence	Q - Sort	Adolescents (n = 30)
Rudner (1978)	Item bias in cognitive assessments	Standard Achievement Test (1964)	Children and youth (n = 2,821)
Vegeley & Elliott (1968)	Validity of personality measures	California Test of Personality	Children (n = 53)
Sussman (1973)	Self and others attitudes	Tennessee Self Concept Scale	Adults (n = 129)
Garrison et al. (1978)	Self-concept measurement and meaning systems	Tennessee Self Concept Scale	Adolescents/Adults (n = 109)

in these studies is broad, including observation systems, rating scales, projective techniques and other methods relying upon both verbal and nonverbal report. Finally, the nature of the populations studied has varied, although including little systematic attention to deaf adults.

Perhaps the most consistent finding from the above studies lies in the suggestion that the self-concept of the deaf individual differs in some ways from that of the non-deaf individual. Typically this conclusion has been reached through some form of a "normative" comparison; however, the dimensions of the observed differences are rarely explored in a manner in which a clearer understanding of the deaf person's conception of him or herself emerges. If, as Mead (1934) contended, the acquisition of language is essential for the development of self, and it the language process poses problems for the deaf individual, then it is probable that the deaf individual lags behind his/her hearing agemate in terms of the amount of information he or she has available upon which to base the self-image. Thus, the question to be addressed in the present context would seem to be whether the self-concept of the deaf person differs in some qualitative aspects from that of the normally hearing person, or whether the observed differences reflect a developmental lag among the hearing-impaired. Research on this issue will require a developmental/ longitudinal approach, clearly lacking in the studies reviewed herein.

Returning to Table 1, one may note further from the brief descriptions of the populations studied that many of the investigations reviewed utilized adolescents. Among the most widely accepted ideas in the behavioral sciences, adolescence has been viewed as a period of disturbance in the self-image. As early as 1904, Hall, for example, characterized adolescence as a period of "storm and stress". Erikson (1959) viewed it

as a time of identity-crisis, during which the child struggles for a stable sense of self. Barker (1953) conceived of the adolescent as moving from the relatively comfortable structured environment of childhood into a new region in which the boundaries were not known and the rules of conduct and expectations were unclear.

The event of pubescence, physical in nature, has led some researchers (e.g., McCandless, 1970) to postulate changes in self-concept in the perhaps unrecognized direction of immature child to generative adult. Thus, while adolescence has been noted for its instability, particularly in self-identification, its effects have not weighed heavily in discussions of research findings on the psychological adjustment of the deaf. However, a more thorough understanding of the impact of deafness on personality in general, and self-concept in particular, demands that such developmental issues should be considered.

Returning again to Table 1, it is apparent that research interest in affective growth and development among the deaf has ranged from very global constructs (e.g., personality and socialization in general) to more specific constructs such as self-concept of ability. With few exceptions, self-concept per se has not been the primary emphasis of many of these same studies. Where it has, typically it has been studied as a global, stable personality trait of the individual. More recent research on the social self has suggested, however, that self-appraisals are subject to the structure of the social situation. On this issue, Webster and Sobieszek (1974) wrote:

> Black people, especially black school children, are often said to have low self-images, as if they carried this image around with them in all circumstances. From our point of view, such a claim is meaningless. Blacks may well have low expectations for their performance at certain tasks such as schoolwork, and they may have low self-expectations by comparison with white school children; but

> until the task and the referent others are specified, the claim has neither meaning nor empirical support. There is a good deal of evidence that black children change their "self-image" considerably depending on which others they think they are being compared with, and there is at least a small amount of evidence that they have quite positive self-expectations for certain kinds of tasks. This is, of course, just what we would expect from a theory of expectation states; it is not explainable from a theory of a transsituational "self-image." What is surprising to us is that social psychologists would have to be reminded to "rediscover the primary group." (pg. 163)

Thus, it may be fruitful in future research considerations of the development of the self-concept to operationalize constructs in a manner which simultaneously affords an analysis of the requirements of specific situations. This has been done in the field of deafness infrequently (Craig, 1965; Joiner et al., 1969).

In the area of programmatic interventions and self-concept enhancement, very little has been written focusing on the deaf individual. Kohl (1967) suggested that the encouragement of sign-language as an element of deaf cultural life may have enhancing effects upon the self-esteem of deaf persons. This position is similar to that of Sotomayer (1977), who suggested that native-language instruction of ethnic minority groups may foster the development of self-identity and self-confidence in school settings.

On a more general level, Koetitz (1976) discussed the use of such conventional strategies as behavior modification, role-playing and independence training in the treatment of social immaturity in deaf children. Beyond this and the previous two references, however, little has appeared in the psychological literature relating to <u>specific</u> instructional strategies to promote the affective growth of the deaf individual. Nevertheless, it would appear that a need for such a body of information exists.

Finally, it is in the area of personality assessment that the psychologist working with the deaf has appeared to experience the greatest amount of frustration in the limitations of appropriate testing devices. In the Campbell and Fiske (1959) tradition, it is encouraging to note the use of the many different measurement methodologies used in the studies included in this review. However, each of these same measurement methodologies seems to have generated more concern over the validity of research findings than actual confidence.

Many of the tests which have been used with deaf respondents were designed specifically for hearing persons. Consequently, these tests have been found to possess both language and situational complexities lying outside the range of ability and experience of the deaf individual. With few exceptions, then, psychological tests used with the deaf have been subject to so many criticisms that their results are frequently uninterpretable.

In conclusion, research on the effects of deafness on the development of the self-concept has progressed rather slowly since Brunschwig's (1936) pioneer study of the general adjustment of deaf children. Doubtless, this slow rate of progress is related to the complexities surrounding trait measurement. However, the discovery of fire was not dependent upon a sophisticated instrument. Language and communication also were first learned through observation, as was the concept of time. Observation is a powerful tool, and its application to the problems confronting researchers in the field of deafness deserves reemphasis.

Finally, while many references are made to the terms "development" and "developmental" in the professional literature relating to the personality of the deaf individual, there is an obvious paucity of

developmental methodology to support particular research findings. Much work remains in studying the actual development of the self throughout the life span. As this information is accumulated, the likelihood of identifying those factors in the deaf person's experience which affect his or her conception of self may be enhanced.

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